

***THE FEELING OF MEANINGLESSNESS: A CHALLENGE TO PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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TODAY more than ever before, the psychiatrist is called upon to treat patients who complain of a sense of futility and emptiness, a feeling of meaninglessness, which this paper will describe in terms of the "existential vacuum".¹ There can be no doubt that the existential vacuum is increasing and spreading. In a recent study of 500 youngsters in Vienna it was shown that the percentage of those suffering from it has increased within the last two years from 30 per cent to 80 per cent.² Even in Africa, the existential vacuum is spreading, particularly among academic youth.³ Freudians as well as Marxists are fully aware of the occurrence of this phenomenon. At a recent conference of psychoanalysts it was reported that more and more patients are suffering from a lack of life content, rather than from clinical symptomatology, and that this state of affairs may well account for so-called interminable analyses because in such cases the psychoanalytic treatment has become the only life content that is available to the patient. As for the Marxists, only recently the Head of the Department of Psychotherapy at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig reported on her investigations which demonstrated the frequency of the existential vacuum. As the Head of the Department of Psychiatry at a Czech university put it, the existential vacuum gets through the borders between capitalist and communist countries, "without a visa."⁴

How is the existential vacuum to be explained? Unlike the animal, man is no

longer told by his instincts as to what he must do. And in contrast to former times, he is no longer told by traditions and values what he should do. Now, knowing neither what he must do nor what he should do, he sometimes does not even know what it is that he basically wishes to do. Instead, he gets to wish to do what other people do (conformity) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism).

Another effect of the existential vacuum is neuroticism. The existential vacuum is not a neurosis in the strictly clinical sense; if it is a neurosis at all, it would have to be diagnosed as a sociogenic neurosis. There are, however, cases in which the existential vacuum eventuates in clinical symptomatology. Such patients are suffering from what the author has called "noogenic neuroses." Crumbaugh has developed a special diagnostic test to differentiate the noogenic from other forms of neurosis.^{5,6} Lukas, although using a different test, has arrived at the same percentage of noogenic neuroses as Crumbaugh, namely 20 per cent.⁷

As to the existential vacuum, however, which in itself is not a neurosis, a statistical survey recently showed that among the writer's European students 25 per cent had had this "abyss experience." Among his American students it was 60 per cent. The fact that the existential vacuum is more noticeable in America than in Europe is due to the exposition of the average American student to indoctrination along reductionist lines.

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Thus, for example, one book defines man as "nothing but a complex biochemical mechanism powered by a combustion system which energizes computers with prodigious storage facilities for retaining encoded information." Or, to quote another example, man is defined as "naked ape." By being offered such reductionist concepts of man, their existential vacuum is reinforced.

It has been shown by Gray and associates⁸ that in medical school as a rule cynicism increases while humanitarianism decreases. Only after the completion of medical studies is this trend reversed, but unfortunately not in all subjects. Here are two definitions offered by the author in whose paper the study was quoted. Man is defined as nothing but "an adaptive control system," and values are defined as mere "homeostatic restraints in a stimulus-response process."⁹ According to still another reductionist definition, values are "nothing but reaction formations and defense mechanisms."

The reductionist interpretation of values is likely to undermine and erode the enthusiasm of youth. Here is an example: A young American couple returned from Africa, where they had served as Peace Corps volunteers, thoroughly "fed up" and disgusted. At the beginning of their training, they had had to participate in mandatory group sessions led by a psychologist who played a game somewhat as follows: "Why did you join the Peace Corps?" "We wanted to help less privileged people." "Then you must think that you are superior to them." "Well, in a way, yes." "So there must be in you, in your unconscious, a need to prove to yourself that you are superior." "Well, we never thought of it that way. But you're a psychologist; you certainly know better." And so it went. These young people were indoctrinated in interpreting their idealism and altru-

ism as no more than "hang-ups."

Unmasking is a perfectly legitimate undertaking, but it should stop once it is confronted with what is genuinely human. How often psychiatrists meet patients who are suffering from, and crippled by, the obsessive compulsion to analyze themselves, to observe and watch themselves, to reflect upon themselves. The cultural climate that is predominant and prevalent in the United States makes for the danger that this compulsion becomes a collective obsessive neurosis. The study by Weisskopf-Joelson¹⁰ and associates shows that the value that ranks highest among American college students is self-interpretation. Such a finding is another indication of the existential vacuum. Just as the boomerang returns to the hunter who has thrown it, only if it has missed its target, man returns to himself, reflects upon himself and becomes overconcerned with self-interpretation only when he has missed his mission, and has been frustrated in his search for meaning.¹¹ The Freudians' experience with patients in whom, as already indicated, the psychoanalytic treatment has become a substitute for life content comes to mind.

In the same study, the value ranking next highest to self-interpretation is self-actualization. But ultimately man can actualize himself only by fulfilling a meaning out there in the world rather than within himself so that self-actualization becomes an effect of "self-transcendence."¹² Being human means relating and being directed to something or someone other than oneself. As Maslow¹³ puts it, the "business of self-actualization" can be best carried out "via a commitment to an important job."

One of the aspects of self-transcendence, namely reaching out for a meaning to fulfill, is identical with what the writer calls the "will to meaning." This concept has been empirically corroborated

rated by Crumbaugh and Maholick.¹⁴ Von Eckartsberg also thinks that "a basic 'will to meaning' has to be assumed as an important motive-value" and that, in fact, "individuals aspire toward the fulfillment of values, the achievement of a meaningful life."¹⁵ Maslow bluntly declares "I agree entirely with Frankl [the writer] that man's primary concern is his will to meaning".¹⁶ Research by Kratochvil and Planova provides evidence based on their tests "that the will to meaning is really a specific need not reducible to other needs, and is present in all human beings to a greater or lesser degree. The relevance of the frustration of this need was documented by the authors, from their case studies of neurotic and depressive patients. In some cases the existential vacuum had a relevant role as an etiological factor in the origin of the neurosis or of the suicidal attempt".¹⁷

In a study by Crumbaugh et al. employing a test designed to measure the will to meaning, the highest scores were obtained from among well-motivated professional and successful business populations. This supports Kotchen's hypothesis¹⁸ that the will to meaning is a reliable criterion of mental health. Conversely, lack of meaning and purpose is indicative of emotional maladjustment, as shown in a study where eighteen out of twenty alcoholics looked upon their existence as meaningless.¹⁹

Frustration of the will to meaning brings about the will to power as well as the "will to pleasure,"²⁰ that is, the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle is the pivot on which the motivation theory of Freudian psychoanalysis hinges. Adlerian psychology, in its turn, ascribed an important role in the etiology of neurosis to the striving for superiority which is likewise an expression of the will to power. Since Freud and Adler had to deal with neurotic patients, that is, with people frustrated

in their will to meaning, it is understandable that they thought that man is basically concerned with pleasure or power, respectively, rather than with meaning.

Research has shown that the will to pleasure is a substitute for the frustrated will to meaning. Thus, people, visiting the Prater in Vienna, an amusement park somewhat comparable to New York's Coney Island, proved to be more existentially frustrated than the average population of Vienna.⁷ Incidentally, the average population of various large cities proved to be existentially frustrated to the same degree.²¹ The will to pleasure not only contradicts the self-transcendent quality of human reality, but also defeats itself. It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness. Happiness cannot be pursued. It must ensue. Happiness is available only as a by-product, as the side-effect of living out the self-transcendence of existence. Once one has fulfilled one's meaning or loves another human being, happiness occurs by itself. On the other hand, the more one makes happiness an aim, the more that aim is missed. This is most conspicuous in cases of sexual neurosis, such as frigidity or impotence. Sexual performance and experience are strangled to the extent to which they are made either an object of attention (hyperreflection) or an objective of intention (hyperintention). Both phenomena are observable also on a mass level. The trend to hyperinterpretation, so pervasive in the United States, may be conceived of in terms of a collective hyperreflection. With regard to a collective hyperintention, consider the emphasis that is placed on sexual achievement. Such emphasis spawns preoccupations and apprehensions. People are overly concerned with sexual success and ridden with fear of sexual failure. But fear tends to fulfill precisely that which one fears. Thus a vicious circle ensues. It accounts for much of

the case load with respect to sexual neuroses which confront the psychiatrist today.

On the mass level, the existential vacuum invites sexual libido to hypertrophy. The result is an inflation of sex, and like inflation in the monetary field, it is associated with a devaluation. More specifically, sex is devalued insofar as it is dehumanized. Sex in humans is always more than mere sex. It serves as the bodily expression of a relationship on the human level; it functions as a vehicle of a personal relationship. In other words, human sex is an incarnation of love. "The people who can't love," says Maslow,²² "don't get the same kind of thrill out of sex as the people who can love."

By what is man led and guided in his search for meaning? The answer is by his conscience. Conscience may be defined as a means to discover meanings, to "sniff them out," as it were. Conscience lets man arrive at the unique meanings dormant in all the unique situations that go to make up a man's life. But it can also lead him astray. Conscience may err, so that man may not know for certain whether his conscience is right and another man's conscience that tells him something else, is wrong or whether the reverse is true. Not that there is no truth, there is. But no one can be absolutely sure that he has arrived at the truth.

In an age like ours, an age of meaninglessness, education, instead of confining itself to transmitting traditions and knowledge, must see as its principal assignment the refining of man's conscience — his only capacity still to find meanings despite the lessening of the influence of traditions and values. In this age where the Ten Commandments are losing their unconditional validity, as in the case of so many, man must remain equipped with the capacity to listen to and obey the thousands of

demands and commandments hidden in the thousands of situations with which life confronts him. These demands are passed on to him by an alert conscience. Only by virtue of an alert conscience can man resist the effects of the existential vacuum — conformism or totalitarianism.

Meaning must be found; it cannot be given. And it must be found by oneself, by one's own conscience. To give meanings would amount to moralizing. But if morals are to survive, they have to be ontologized. Ontologized morals, however, will no longer define what is good and what is bad in terms of what one should do as over against what one must not do. But what is good will be defined as that which fosters the meaning-fulfillment of a being. And what is bad will be defined as that which hinders this meaning-fulfillment.

In addition to being ontologized, morals are to be existentialized as well. A doctor cannot give meanings to his patients, nor can a professor give meanings to his students. What he may give, however, is an example, the existential example of his personal commitment to the search for truth. The answer to the question of what is the meaning of life can be posited only out of one's whole being — one's own life is the answer to the question of the meaning of life.

The psychiatrist cannot show his patient what the meaning is.²¹ Even less can he "supply the patient with his goal."²³ But he may well demonstrate to the patient that *there is a meaning* and that, what is even more important, life, not only holds a meaning, a unique meaning, for each man, but also never ceases to contain such a meaning. Even the negative, the tragic aspects of human existence, what the author called the tragic triad — pain, guilt, and death — may be turned into something positive, something creative. Caught in a

hopeless situation as its helpless victim, facing a fate that cannot be changed, man still may turn his predicament into an achievement and accomplishment at

the human level. He may thus bear witness to the human potential; he may turn tragedy into a triumph.

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